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ABSTRACT

In the last 5 or 6 years, there has been an outburst of scholarly work published about traditional and contemporary Chinese rhetoric. Some of these pieces have appeared in communication journals and some in English and composition journals, and disciplinary boundaries may have prevented getting a good idea of exactly what, and how much research, is going on. Most of the work done so far concerns rhetoric of the Classical Chinese period or of the modern era--much more remains to be done. The great wealth of texts, both of theory and of practice, have so far received almost no attention from rhetoricians. Early Chinese philosophy is an extremely rhetorical phenomenon, therefore an understanding of rhetoric is crucial for understanding Chinese political and intellectual life. (A bibliography of 20 recent works on Chinese rhetoric is attached.) (CR)

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Panel on
"East Asian Communication Research: State of the Art"

"Research in Rhetoric in China"

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First, I would like to note an ambiguity in the title of my presentation, and clarify it. I will not be talking about research in rhetoric being carried out in China by Chinese scholars, for the simple reason that there are other communication scholars who probably are better able to speak about this: to mention just a couple, Xing Lu, at DePaul University, or Xiaosui Xiao, from Hong Kong Baptist University. Instead, I will talk about Western studies of rhetoric in China, and of these, mainly the Anglo-American, reflecting my own limitations. This limitation is not as serious as it might appear, though, since in Western sinology, as in some other fields of scholarship, English is close to a lingua franca.

So, on to my observations about the state of the study of Chinese rhetoric in the English-speaking West. I must say at the outset that this is a study in its infancy. Right now we don't have available to us surveys of Chinese rhetoric, collections of primary texts, a body of secondary scholarship, or, perhaps most important, a canon to fight over!

At the same time, this study is starting to attain the critical mass that may make such resources possible. In the last five to six years, there has been an outburst of work published about traditional and contemporary Chinese rhetoric. Some of these pieces have appeared in communication journals, and some in English and composition journals, and our disciplinary boundaries may have prevented some of us from getting a good idea of exactly what, and how much, research is going on. To help remedy this problem I'm attaching a bibliography here. I'd also like to note

in passing that Xing Lu will have a book on Classical Chinese rhetoric out soon, and that Randy Kluver recently published his A Rhetoric of Myth and Orthodoxy: Legitimizing the Chinese Economic Reforms.

Like these two books, most of the work done so far concerns rhetoric of the Classical Chinese period or of the modern era. It is not a criticism of the existing scholarship, but rather an indicator of the richness of the Chinese materials for these two periods, that allows me to say that much, much more remains to be done. And when even the surface of these two widely-separated historical periods have hardly been scratched, how much more so the developments, controversies, pedagogies, and practices of the intervening two thousand years? There is a great wealth of texts here, both of theory and of practice, but so far they have received almost no attention from rhetoricians. The one exception I am aware of is Yameng Liu's excellent article "To Capture the Essence of Chinese Rhetoric," in which he introduces some of the leading lights in traditional Chinese composition theory.

I'd also like to call attention to the field in composition called "contrastive rhetoric." This field arose out of the experiences of composition teachers working with non-native speakers, and the overlying issue of the field is an eminently rhetorical one: to what extent do the writing patterns of non-native students reflect culturally distinct styles of writing, perhaps traceable to the influence of their native rhetorical

tradition? There has been quite a lively controversy about this, and much of the debate has centered on Chinese speakers/writers and contemporary Chinese patterns of expression and argument.

I've been talking about the study of Chinese rhetoric from a communication or rhetorical standpoint. Recently there has been increasing recognition among China scholars that what is called early Chinese philosophy is an extremely rhetorical phenomenon, and, therefore, that an understanding of rhetoric is crucial for understanding Chinese political and intellectual life. Yameng Liu's article "Three Issues in the Argumentative Conception of Early Chinese Discourse" is a nice example. Although Liu is affiliated with an English department, this piece appeared in the journal Philosophy East and West, and one of his three theses is the necessity for a "rhetorical reconstruction of the classical masters." Along the same lines, I just received a flyer for a book called The Pheasant Cap Master: A Rhetorical Reading, by Carine Defoort, published by the State University of New York Press. In this book Defoort analyses the early Chinese text He guan zi, and uses a rhetorical perspective to do so: in the words of one reviewer (John S. Major) "the focus here is not only on what the He guan zi says, but how things are said, and how language is used in argumentation." I suspect we will be seeing more such works by China scholars in the near future.

In addition to these works with an explicit orientation to rhetoric, there is also a tremendous amount of information about Chinese rhetoric scattered through books and articles about

Chinese culture, politics, society, and intellectual life. This work is from China scholars who do not label themselves rhetoricians, but who include discussion of the rhetorical aspects of the literary, political, or religious texts they are studying. It is, admittedly, a challenge to dig it out, but the results are fascinating. Let me give just one example: the work of Victor Mair and others on the intersections between orality and literacy in Buddhist popular preaching and proselytizing (especially the use of the popularly-oriented bianwen, the "transformation tales").

Finally, I would like to point to a truly heartening marker of progress. Recently I organized a panel for the forthcoming conference of the International Society for the History of Rhetoric in Saskatoon next summer. I was able to identify, and invite, so many scholars with expertise in Chinese rhetoric, who were all were interested in presenting their work, that we now have two panels on Chinese rhetorics at this conference.

So, I am very happy about seeing so much work produced recently and I am very optimistic about the prospects for the study of Chinese rhetoric. There is much work to be done, but we have more and more good scholars doing it.

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